

The COMPLETE POEMS *of*
MICHELANGELO



Translated by

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THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS
Chicago & London

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS, CHICAGO 60637
THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS, LTD., LONDON

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Paperback edition 2000

Printed in the United States of America

07 06 05 04 03 02 01 00 2 3 4 5

ISBN: 0-226-08033-1 (cloth)
ISBN: 0-226-08030-7 (paperback)

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Brow burning, in cool gloom, as sundown shears
earth of its gala rays, alone I've lain.
Others lie here in pleasure, I in pain,
shaken, face down on earth, with sobs and tears.

3

I was happy, with fate favoring, to abide,
even to frustrate, Love, your savagery,
just to regret it now—in spite of me
these tears give proof how formidable you are.

If your pitiless arrows missed by far
the target of my heart, long years ago,
revenge is yours; your eyes, so dazzling, throw
far deadlier darts my way, none going wide.

How many a hidden net, how many a snare
the dapper songbird, by some twist of fate,
is spared from, with a sadder death in store.

Such, ladies, as you see, is the fate I share:
Love kills me in a crueller way, so late
he assails, having spared me the long years before.

How joyfully it shows, the garland there,
flowers intertwining with the lady's tresses,
blossom with blossom jostling, as each finesses
for a better spot to kiss that golden head.

All the day long the dress is comforted,
skirt flowing free from where the bodice tightens;
her collar's flounce ("spun gold" they call it) brightens
as it brushes on cheek, throat, shoulder, everywhere.

That ribbon of gold lamé upon her breast
thrills even more with delight, seems all aquiver
at what it touches beneath the inserted lace;

and the belt, demurely knotted, is so blest
it seems to sigh, "I could hug like this forever!"
Then what would they do—these arms!—in such embrace?

5

A goiter it seems I got from this backward craning
 like the cats get there in Lombardy, or wherever
 —bad water, they say, from lapping their fetid river.
 My belly, tugged under my chin, 's all out of whack.

Beard points like a finger at heaven. Near the back
 of my neck, skull scrapes where a hunchback's hump
 would be.

I'm pigeon-breasted, a harpy! Face dribbled—see?—
 like a Byzantine floor, mosaic. From all this straining
 my guts and my hambones tangle, pretty near.

Thank God I can swivel my butt about for ballast.
 Feet are out of sight; they just scuffle round, erratic.

Up front my hide's tight elastic; in the rear
 it's slack and droopy, except where crimps have callused.
 I'm bent like a bow, half-round, type Asiatic.

Not odd that what's on my mind,
 when expressed, comes out weird, jumbled. Don't berate;
 no gun with its barrel screwy can shoot straight.

Giovanni, come agitate
 for my pride, my poor dead art! I don't belong!
 Who's a painter? Me? No way! They've got me wrong.

If any of those old proverbs, lord, make sense
it's this: the one who's able, doesn't care to.
Such gossip, such crazy tales you've lent an ear to,
rewarding the one I know to be dead wrong.

I've been your loyal servant ever so long;
no sunbeam's more attentive to the sun.
Nothing to you, though, how my seasons run;
the more I drudge, the more I give offense.

My hope was, your eminence would help me rise,
that the scales of justice, the almighty sword
might still avail, not these same mouthy folk.

But virtue, its worth devalued in the skies,
is put out to grass on earth, where its reward
is scrounging for acorns from a mouldy oak.

8

O God, O God, O God, how can I be
no more my own? Not me?
Who stole my *me* away,
possessing it, to sway
all will of mine so I'm no longer me?

O God, O God, O God!
My skin unscathed, how may
this heart be wounded so?
What is it, Love, can dart
through eyes to the deep heart
to swell, as floods in tight arroyos grow,
this feverish overflow?

9

He Who made all there is, made every part
at first, then put those loveliest of all
together, to show what beauty's at His call,
as here, in this triumph of celestial art.

10

Chalices hammered into sword and helmet!
Christ's blood sold, slopped in palmfuls. With the yields
from commerce of cross and thorns, more lances, shields.
Still His long-suffering mercy falls like dew?

These lands are lands He'd better not come through.
If He did, His blood would boil, seething sky-high,
what with His flesh on sale, in good supply.
Virtue? Cast out. NO ENTRY signs repel it.

If losing money were the way I'm driven
—true, I've no work here—well, the triple hat
could freeze me out, no doubt, in Medusa's manner.

But now, if poverty's all the vogue in heaven,
how work the reversal of our grim estate,
as bloody flags take the wind out of heaven's banner?

18

Though shouldered from the road I chose
when young,
I'd backtrack now. The byways I've explored!
All vain, in the trials and struggles I'm among.
The sea, the mountain, and the fiery sword!
Hemmed in by such as these, somehow I live.
But the one absconding with my wits won't give
me leave to have a go at the mountain road . . .

30

From eyes of my beloved one, come burning
flashes of fire so brilliant that through mine,
even closed tight, they stream, piercing the heart.
Off balance, poor Love's hurt:
bringing from you rays sheer and crystalline,
under my gloom he's burdened when returning.

32

I live for sinning, for the self that dies,
my life being mine no more, this life in sin.
Heaven made me good; I dug the pit I'm in.
My will—of my own will—I've willed away,
 enslaved my liberty, made this case of clay
my very god—O miserable me!
And so I'm born for this! This ignominy! . . .

Where my love lives is nowhere in my heart,
since, for the way I love you, heart's no home.
Such love as mine's not made of boorish loam
akin to sin and many a mouldy thought.

When our souls left the hand of God, love wrought
me with pure eye, you radiating light;
my yearning can't but see Him there, so bright
in—to our grief—your each poor mortal part.

Separate heat from fire—then you can prise
eternal beauty from my way of seeing,
which glorifies what resembles Him, here, now.

Since I behold all heaven in your eyes,
to get back there, where first we loved, I'm fleeing,
fevered with love, to the hospice of your brow.